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MORE THAN CHILD'S PLAY:

Preventing Truancy and Promoting Success

A Resource to Help Schools and Communities Work Together to Reduce Truancy

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SCOTT HARSHBARGER
Attorney General

Commonwealth of Massachusetts

A MESSAGE FROM THE ATTORNEY GENERAL:

Chronic school truancy is a serious problem that, in recent months, has begun to receive the attention it deserves. Here in the Commonwealth, as around the country, there are thousands of children who do not attend school regularly and who ultimately fall far behind in their studies and drop out of school. The consequences of truancy and dropping out are far more devastating for these children than for previous generations because of the nature of today's economy, in which those who lack basic skills are increasingly forced into the margins of mainstream society, unable to attain economic self-sufficiency.

Research and real world experience have shown repeatedly that chronic absenteeism or school truancy are among the first and most reliable indicators that a student is at risk for dropping out of school and on a path to a lifetime of failure. Students who do not attend school regularly not only limit their own future career options, but are at greater risk for many other problems including substance abuse, teen pregnancy, poverty, and criminal activity. When schools are able to intervene successfully and help address truancy and attendance problems as soon as they occur, there is a powerful opportunity to prevent long-term consequences.

As Attorney General, I have worked closely with schools across the Commonwealth to create safe schools that will enable all our students to achieve their full potential. Our initiatives have included annual Safe Schools conferences, semi-annual Safe Schools Newsletters, developing and supporting the SCORE conflict resolution and peer mediation program, Safe Schools legislation, and most recently, making available to every school district in the Commonwealth *In a Flash*, a video and curriculum designed to help educators provide young people with practical strategies to prevent gun-related injury and death. We have also published *No Time to Lose: A Comprehensive Action Plan to Prevent Youth Violence,* which contains a number of school-related recommendations.

In the past year the focus of our efforts has expanded to include truancy prevention. My office has been fortunate to have a fellow, trained in public health and sponsored by the Soros Foundation, working with us full time to study the problem of school truancy. This handbook results from her research into national and international efforts to predict, prevent, and combat school truancy. It is specifically designed as a resource for schools in planning and implementing truancy prevention and intervention strategies. Included are a checklist of indicators that predict potential truancy or chronic attendance problems, strategies for addressing truancy, brief descriptions of programs

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from across the nation that have been evaluated and have proven successful in preventing or reducing truancy, and answers to important questions regarding attendance laws in the Commonwealth.

Many exciting and innovative efforts to combat truancy are currently being implemented in schools throughout the Commonwealth. We have not attempted to describe these programs, concentrating instead on those efforts from around the country that have already been evaluated and reported in the literature. However, I eagerly solicit any information you are willing to share about promising Massachusetts initiatives, which we will make available to others through the upcoming Safe Schools Newsletter.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office if you have specific questions or comments on this manual, or would like more information on the truancy prevention and intervention strategies highlighted in it. I hope the information presented in this manual will be useful to you as you design, implement, and revise truancy prevention initiatives in your own communities.

Scott Harshbarger

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HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY STUDENTS WHO ARE LIKELY TO BECOME TRUANT OR DROP OUT OF SCHOOL?

While truancy is most commonly identified as a problem in the middle or high school years, numerous indicators are apparent as early as the elementary school years that truancy and dropping out of school are potential future problems.* Students who display a combination of the traits listed are most likely to leave school before graduation, and many of the traits or characteristics may be apparent as early as elementary school. By staying alert to these early indicators, schools may have the opportunity to intervene and prevent future long-term problems.

CHECKLIST OF INDICATORS FOR TRUANCY AND ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

Students who display a number of the following indicators may be at risk for truancy or dropping out of school. School personnel should be alert to the potential for truancy problems among students who:

- are below grade level in reading, mathematics or English
- are frequently tardy
- have frequent or unexplained patterns of absences
- have freqently moved or changed schools
- have been retained a grade (two grades indicates high risk)
- are socially immature
- skip classes
- are verbally deficient
- frequently visit the school nurse or have many health problems
- are rebellious toward authority
- are disliked by peers
- participate rarely, if at all, in extracurricular activities
- are gifted and talented and bored with school
- have low self esteem
- lack respect for teachers
- work outside school more than 20 hours per week
- live in homes with significant dysfunction, including child abuse or substance abuse
- have had frequent contact with police
- have older siblings who were truant or dropped out of school
- act rebellious or defiant.

* This list has been adapted from a checklist published by the Maine Department of Education, Office of Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT TRUANCY OR INTERVENE ONCE IT HAS BECOME A PROBLEM?

Research-Based Truancy Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Once a student has been identified as at risk for truancy, schools may be able to intervene to address the underlying risk factors and prevent chronic absenteeism, truancy, or dropping out of school. The appropriate intervention will depend on which risk factors the student exhibits, and some factors are clearly outside the control of the school. Nonetheless, there may be many interventions schools can make to ensure that at-risk children continue to attend school regularly and progress academically.

There does not seem to be one ideal truancy prevention program that fits all communities. Each community must plan attendance, truancy and dropout programs in terms of what makes educational sense given its own unique circumstances, resources and characteristics. The following recommendations, however, drawn from a review of the literature describing successful truancy prevention and attendance improvement programs, comprise the basic elements that are frequently part of successful truancy programs:

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

1. Retain Focus in the School:

While it is important to involve an entire community--including the business community, governmental agencies, and other organizations--in a truancy-prevention effort, it is also important that the schools coordinate these initiatives and remain the focus of a comprehensive plan to combat the truancy problem.

2. Policy Statement/ Procedural Manual:

Schools should develop, publish and widely publicize a strong attendance policy statement so that parents and students are well aware of the expectation that students attend regularly, and so that the consequences of failure to attend school regularly are explicitly spelled out. To encourage and help achieve consistency, all definitions, expectations, procedures and consequences should be written into a procedural manual. Schools should consider requiring parents and students to sign and return a form indicating that they have read and understood the policy.

3. Accurate Record Keeping:

Accurate record keeping is essential. Without accurate attendance records, it is impossible to operate a successful program and very difficult to evaluate the impact of

programs or initiatives designed to combat truancy. Many schools now utilize computer programs that track attendance each period of the school day.

4. Early Identification and Prompt Follow-up for Absences:

It is important to identify attendance problems early and to intervene as quickly as possible. This requires that there be clear criteria for early identification and clear guidelines for follow-up. Prompt attention, whether by phone, letter, or a home visit, as spelled out in the attendance policy, should occur in response to absenteeism.

5. Documenting Intervention Efforts:

The process of documenting school interventions has a number of benefits. It can assist school staff in determining what has already been tried and what may be an appropriate next intervention step. Reviewing documented interventions over time may also assist school staff in upgrading practices that encourage regular school attendance.

6. Suitable Educational Programs:

Often students become truant because of academic difficulties. Programs that address underlying problems, including alternative curricula and alternative schools, special education, work experience, vocational training, guidance and counseling, tutorial and remedial programs can be essential to improving attendance. In addition, mentoring programs and programs that pair good attenders with, poor attenders have been shown to help improve school attendance for at-risk youth. Early identification and special programs at the elementary school level should be established.

7. Alternatives to Suspension:

Students who are frequently suspended are potential truants and dropouts. Alternatives to suspension, such as detention or in-school suspension, should be considered where they can be safely and effectively implemented.

8. Recognition for Attendance:

Incentives or rewards for good attendance can be effective. A growing body of research indicates that incentives have a more powerful impact on improving attendance than sanctions.

GETTING OTHERS INVOLVED

1. Interagency Cooperation:

Many attendance problems demand assessment and intervention by agencies outside the school system. It is important to develop a cooperative approach to the problems. Interagency councils or groups can be effective at bringing together all those concerned with youth at risk so the spectrum of problems can be addressed. Members should include educators, human services and justice system professionals, business and industry representatives, civic leaders, school board members, parents and other concerned citizens.

2. Parent Involvement:

Parental involvement is a crucial component of a successful school attendance or truancy prevention program. Informing parents promptly when their children are absent, and seeking their assistance, will help keep students in school. All policies, expectations and procedures should be communicated to and understood by the parent. Parents should be encouraged to participate in the development and implementation of attendance policies and initiatives to increase school attendance.

3. Public Relations:

Efforts should be made to create community recognition and understanding of the importance of regular school attendance by all school-age children, and to encourage a wide range of people to help solve the problem. Community support and involvement in ongoing school activities are important in encouraging student attendance. Community interest should be encouraged in a wide range of ways including newsletters, public service announcements, parent-teacher-community collaborations and associations, and displays in local centers.

4. Continuum of Follow-up Including Involvement of Local Law Enforcement:

Initial attempts to deal with absenteeism should occur at the local school level. However, if problems become more chronic or severe, it is important that the case be referred to more specialized personnel including social workers, local police, probation officers, and juvenile court. Graduated interventions and the leverage provided by law enforcement are important elements in many effective programs. This, again, calls for the establishment of criteria and guidelines.

5. Staff Development and Joint Training Programs:

It is very helpful to have specially trained personnel to deal with the needs of high risk students in both an educational and community context. All those who are responsible for encouraging and enforcing attendance should be involved in training and in-service

programs. Well-designed training programs can foster a common understanding of the problem and a general agreement on direction, both of which are essential to the success of a program.

6. Meaningful Incentives for Parental Responsibility:

Each community must determine the best way to create meaningful incentives for parents to ensure their children's school attendance. In addition to existing sanctions such as fines and loss of public assistance, communities can provide positive incentives for responsible parents who ensure that their children regularly attend school. For example, eligibility for some publicly funded programs, such as after-school care, could be made contingent on parental efforts to ensure good school attendance by children.

7. Business Community Involvement:

The business community can be an integral part of an overall program to encourage regular school attendance. Business involvement can take many forms including reporting students who patronize businesses or loiter in business areas during school hours, partnership programs to link businesses and schools, and summer or after-school jobs programs for students who attend school regularly and maintain acceptable grades.

8. "Family Friendly" School Environment:

For families and schools to work together to solve problems such as truancy, there must be mutual trust and communication. Schools can help by being "family friendly" and encouraging teachers and parents to make regular contact before problems arise. Schools that are not already doing so may want to consider arranging convenient times and settings for parent meetings, starting homework hotlines, and hiring or appointing a parent liaison, particularly if cultural or linguistic barriers interfere with regular parent/ teacher communication.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Evaluation:

Evaluation of programs or initiatives is desirable, though not always practical in school settings. Where possible, truancy prevention and intervention initiatives at the individual, school-wide, and district-wide levels should be asessed for effectiveness.

2. Sources of Funding:

It is important to consider alternatives to public funding of truancy programs. In many places, the business community has contributed money, equipment, personnel and consultation to efforts to combat truancy.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM PROGRAMS THAT WORK

A number of innovative truancy prevention and intervention programs are being implemented in Massachusetts schools and in other locations around the country. Of these, only a small proportion have been studied, evaluated and reported in the literature on school truancy. A few of the more interesting, effective and wide ranging approaches drawn from the literature are described below:

California School/LawEnforcement Partnership (S/LEP) and School Attendance Review Boards (SARB)

In California, a formal partnership between schools and law enforcement, combined with a requirement that multidisciplinary attendance review boards be established in every school district, has helped make truancy prevention/intervention a statewide priority.

School/Law Enforcement Partnership (S/LEP), established by the State Attorney General and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction:

- encourages schools and law enforcement agencies to develop and implement interagency partnerships, programs, strategies and activities that improve school attendance, encourage good citizenship and promote safe schools;
- establishes, among other things, a statewide cadre of professionals and technical assistance facilitators from education, law enforcement and other youth-serving agencies. The cadre assists schools with such matters as drug and alcohol prevention, truancy and dropout prevention, child abuse reporting and prevention, safe school planning, conflict resolution and youth mediation, suicide prevention, peer counseling, school attendance review boards (SARBs), parental education, and forming local school/law enforcement partnerships.

By statute, California has created *School Attendance Review Boards (SARBs)*, composed of representatives from various youth-serving agencies, to help truant or recalcitrant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of available school and community resources. Although the goal of SARB is to keep students in school and provide them with a meaningful educational experience, SARB does have the power, when necessary, to refer students and their parents or guardians to court.

Contact Information:
California Department of Education
Safe School and Violence Prevention Office
560 J Street Suite 260
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 323-2183

Dade County, Florida Truancy Intervention Program (TIP)

The Dade County, Florida, State's Attorney's Office and Public Schools are targeting problems before they become entrenched by focusing on attendance in the **elementary school years**. The Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) envisions school attendance as the beginning rather than the end of the process needed to provide effective intervention that may prevent future delinquency. As a result, various strategies–including remedial tutoring, social service assistance, and if needed, court assistance through Florida's dependency system or through appropriate criminal prosecution– are used to develop and implement solutions.

TIP was developed after research indicated that the number one predictor of juvenile delinquency is truancy. It was further discovered that truancy typically began in the fourth grade. A grand jury review of over 5,000 serious juvenile offenders revealed the following startling conclusions:

- On average, more than 80% of the 13-year-olds had a history of truancy.
- More than 70% of the 14-year-olds had a history of truancy.
- 75% of Florida prison inmates are functionally illiterate.
- School drop-outs are 350% more likely than high school graduates to be arrested.

Armed with this information, the State Attorney's office and Dade County Public Schools developed a program that targets truancy and attendance problems in the elementary school years.

Elements of the Truancy Intervention Program Include:

- computerized attendance tracking and reporting to identify truant children (with 5 unexcused absences);
- both the schools and the State Attorney's office review attendance data and coordinate efforts to identify students;
- parents are notified of the law by a letter signed by the State Attorney's office and school personnel and ordered to meet with a school administrator, school attendance personnel, counselors, a representative from the State Attorney's office, and needed social service agencies;
- parental responsibility to ensure regular school attendance and compliance with the state's compulsory attendance laws is stressed at the initial meeting;
- the meeting is also used to evaluate the entire family situation to determine the causes of truancy;
- the student's school attendance continues to be tracked and follow-up meetings are mandated as needed;
- if after two meetings at the school a third meeting is necessary, it is held at the State Attorney's office downtown.

Some of the impressive results of the pilot program:

- Unexcused absences decreased by 80% after the first meeting.
- 94% of TIP students reduced unexcused absences.
- Students averaged 14 unexcused absences per semester before the intervention and only 2 after the conferences.
- 60% of the students improved their grades and 45% improved their effort.
- There was a 90% decrease in the number of student code of conduct violations.
- Only 3 students required the third meeting.

Contact Information:

Truancy Intervention Project
Dade County Office of the State Attorney
E.R. Graham Building
1350 NW 12th Avenue
Miami, FL 33136
(305) 547-0100

Ramsey County, Minnesota, Truancy Intervention Project, (TIP)

The Ramsey County, Minnesota Truancy Intervention Project, (TIP), is similar to the Dade County model, except that it focuses on **middle school** rather than elementary school children.

During the 1995-96 school year, the program was implemented in five school districts and involved 34 schools. The program is a three step process of intervention designed to address the problem of truancy when initial school efforts have not succeeded.

Step One: The county attorney's office works with schools to identify students who have three to five unexcused absences. These students and their parents are then invited to attend a **large group meeting** at which an assistant county attorney discusses the legal and social consequences of truancy.

***Step Two*:** If school attendance does not improve following the parent meeting, the county attorney's office convenes a **School Attendance Review Team (SART)**. This meeting is attended by both parent and student and involves a specific discussion of the legal ramifications of truancy and the negotiation of a contract with both parent and student regarding the improvement of attendance.

***Step Three*:** If attendance still fails to improve, the county attorney's office files a **truancy petition with an expedited hearing date**.

Some of the results of TIP from last year include:

- Out of the 2078 referrals to TIP received by the county attorney's office, only 19% required a SART hearing; the remaining 81% showed improved attendance after Step One.
- Out of the original 2078 referrals, only 9.6% progressed to Step Three, resulting in only 200 petitions filed.
- Time from filing to court appearance has been cut in half. In the past there was a four week waiting period for appearing in Juvenile Court; through the program that has been reduced to two weeks.

One advantage of the TIP program is that the same county attorney works with the student and parent throughout the entire process. As with the Dade County model, a system of graduated intervention is successful for reducing truancy and improving school attendance. Because students have been responsive to the initial steps of the intervention, more intrusive measures, such as truancy petitions, have been minimized.

Contact Information:
Truancy Intervention Program
Office of the Ramsey County Attorney
50 West Kellogg Boulevard, Suite 315
St. Paul, MN 55102
(612) 266-3125

The Multnomah County, Oregon Truancy Diversion Program

The Multnomah County, Oregon Truancy Diversion Program targets two populations: youth transitioning from grade school to middle school and those moving from middle school to high school. It uses two different models of intervention: targeted outreach and intensive family- centered intervention for the younger group and peer mentoring for the older group.

***The Elementary School Study Group*:**

This program targets youth transitioning from grade school to middle school and is focused on a geographic region that is disproportionately poor, minority and with high rates of absenteeism and low levels of achievement. According to data from the Portland Public Schools, students in the target area are more likely to be involved in negative classroom behavior, are exhibiting higher levels of discipline referrals, and are more at risk for involvement in delinquency and dependence processes in the juvenile justice system when compared to students in the non-target areas of the Portand Public Schools.

The elementary school program elements are as follows:

- Aggressive outreach is targeted to those exhibiting high absences from school.
- These students are identified through a daily review of attendance records.
- A Youth Outreach Worker delivers intervention–primarily crisis intervention and family mediation services–using behavioral contracts and child advocacy strategies to return the youth to school.
- Interventions are provided in the family home environment.
- A second level of intervention targets those youth and families experiencing difficulty in follow-through with the Youth Outreach Worker. These families are referred to the Family Resource Center where they will be provided access to community-based services including family counseling, mediation, conflict resolution and advocacy.
- Services are augmented by a "Flexible Services Fund" that is used to purchase individualized, family-specific services.
- A Student Retrieval Classroom also has been implemented to meet the needs of those youth who, despite other interventions, continue to experience attendance problems on a regular basis.

The Student Retrieval Classrooms use a program, YOUTH CHANGE, that focuses on building motivation to attend and excel in school, designed specifically for dealing with multi-offender, multi-problem youth. YOUTH CHANGE was evaluated by the University of Michigan in 1990 and found to be effective in returning to school 80% of a group of drop-outs in the Mt. Adams school district in Washington State, who then had a 90% on-time attendance rate.

After only one full year in operation, the Truancy Diversion Project has been credited with helping elementary students in one cluster in the program increase their attendance by an average of 8%, with the average attendance rate going from 74% to 82%. In another cluster attendance has improved by an average of 14%, going from an average of 68% to 82%. This translates into an increase of three to four additional weeks of school during which the student is in attendance.

The High School Study Group:

The high school program includes use of a mentoring program to increase attendance and promote school success for incoming 9th graders.

- Mentors are high school juniors who have been offered courses in crisis intervention, peer mediation, conflict resolution, cultural diversity and competency development.
- Mentors are paired with eighth graders from the feeder middle schools targeted as a result of their truancy and related problems.
- Mentors work with the students throughout the summer and receive stipends of $5.00 per hour.

For youth and families who refuse these services provided at the community level and who refuse to comply with truancy law, after documentation of efforts made by the school and community providers, the case is referred to Juvenile Court.

Contact Information:
Truancy Diversion Project
Multnomah County Department of Juvenile Justice Services
1401 NE 68th Street
Portland, OR 97213
(503) 248-3460

Lancaster United Against Truancy Multimedia Campaign, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

The school committee for the school district of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, established a committee to develop a plan to combat the district's truancy problem, characterized by high truancy rates and one of the highest dropout rates in the state. Every day 18% of the district's 1700 high school students, 15% of the district's 2400 junior high students, and 8% of the district's 6400 elementary students were absent. The high correlation between truancy and daytime crime, and research indicating that the most effective advertising is multi-media, led to the establishment of the Lancaster United Against Truancy multi-media campaign as one component of a broader truancy prevention strategy.

An advertising firm agreed to produce public service announcements and, together with the Mayor's office and the school committee, developed a three-year strategy. The first year focused at the community level, the second year at the parent's level and the third year at the student level. A variety of media have been used to stimulate community and parental awareness: **network television, cable television, radio, newspapers, bus posters and community events**. The city was able to obtain private sector sponsorship and in-kind contributions in order to buy paid time and advertisements. Other program elements include:

Truancy Committee:

The Lancaster United Against Truancy Committee was created to assume full responsibility for coordinating the entire truancy program, including soliciting community involvement, developing and overseeing parental education, student guidance, fund-raising, corporate sponsorship, and budget allocation.

Public Relations:

Targeted public relations programs were launched to help deliver the program's message to targeted groups such as businesses, civic organizations, churches, and athletic leagues. A comprehensive evaluation of the overall program is set to begin this year. However, preliminary data seem to indicate that improvements have begun to take hold, including a significant increase in overall school attendance rates, a decrease in school dropout and expulsion rates, and the general sense that the multi-media campaign "has made truancy less acceptable in the community." *School District of Lancaster Six Year Enrollment/Graduation/ Dropout/ Attendance/Discipline Trendlines, 1991-92 Through 1996-97.*

Contact Information:
Lancaster United Against Truancy
Buehrle School
426 East Clay Street
Lancaster, PA 17602
(717) 291-6289

CONCLUSION

The suggestions and model programs identified here are only some of the many creative approaches schools and communities, including many in Massachusetts, have adopted to promote good school attendance. Whatever approach is taken, the most important thing is that truancy be taken seriously as a critical opportunity to prevent long-term, devastating problems for both individuals and communities. An effective program requires policies and practices that demonstrate a shared responsibility among schools, students, parents, law enforcement, and the many other community members and institutions.

Ensuring that all children have the opportunity to succeed in life is now, more than ever, contingent upon their full engagement in a system of high quality education beginning in their earliest years and continuing into adulthood. Truancy is a call for help that, when met with appropriate action, can mean the difference between a lifetime of potential fulfilled and a lifetime of failure.

Appendix A

TRUANCY PREVENTION AS PUBLIC PROTECTION:
THE TRUANCY /CRIME CONNECTION

- As early as the 1800's, social reformers recognized the association between truancy and delinquency.[1]
- By 1915, social scientists had labeled truancy the "kindergarten of crime." One early criminologist noted that in cases brought to the court on other grounds, "nearly a quarter of the young male offenders showed a history of truancy. In nearly all of these cases truancy represented the first offense."[2]
- In 1942, a study analyzing delinquency patterns in Chicago found they closely matched the truancy patterns throughout neighborhoods. The researchers concluded that there existed a very strong correlation between truancy and delinquency.[3]
- A 1997 study of violence in Chicago neighborhoods found that, among other "protective factors" associated with lower levels of neighborhood violence, was a willingness on the part of adults in the neighborhood to intervene when youngsters, not necessarily their own, are truant.[4]
- A 1979 study of 258 adult criminal recidivists revealed that 78 percent of the inmates showed truancy as the first entry on their arrest records. Furthermore, of the remainder, 67% admitted being truant but not being charged with the offense.[5]
- In a 1988 study of 70,000 juvenile offenders, the researchers concluded that among the best predictors for future criminality and the most likely juvenile recidivists were those whose first referrals involved truancy.[6]
- Several studies, the most recent of which was conducted in 1996 by the Dade County Florida Grand Jury, found that between 75 and 85 percent of Florida's serious juvenile offenders have been truant or chronically absent from school.[7]

ENDNOTES:

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4. Sampson, R., Raudenbush, S., Earls, F., Neighborhood and violent crime: A multi-level study of collective efficacy. *Science*, vol. 277, August 15, 1997.
5. Vedder, C., Juvenile Offenders, Springfield, Illinois Press, 1979
6. Snyder, H., Court Careers of Juvenile Offenders, Pittsburgh, PA : National Center for Juvenile Justice, 1988
7. Fernandez Rundle, K., Truancy: an early indicator of future criminality. School Safety, November 1997.

Appendix B

MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL ATTENDANCE LAWS AND REGULATIONS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: ***What are the rules for compulsory attendance of students in public schools?***

A: With certain exceptions, Massachusetts law requires that students between the ages of six and 16 attend school. School committees are required to operate the schools for at least 180 days per school year. Necessary absences of up to seven full days or 14 half days in any six month period may be excused.

Q: ***Who is responsible for determining what constitutes an excused or an unexcused absence?***

A: Each school committee has the authority to establish reasonable attendance policies. The policy should define what may be considered an excused or an unexcused absence and should be contained in the discipline code furnished to students. The superintendent, or teachers if authorized by the school committee or the superintendent, may decide whether to excuse a particular absence.

Q: ***Can a school district penalize a student academically if he or she violates the attendance policy?***

A: A policy that lowered academic grades or denied credit to students who violate the school attendance policy would probably be upheld by the courts as long as the policy does not penalize students who are absent because of a disability or other legitimate reason. Schools are required to comply with laws, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, which require schools to make reasonable accommodation for students who are absent because of a disability, which can include temporary or long-term illness.

Q: ***What are the obligations of school committees to ensure that children attend school?***

A: The school committee of each town is responsible for providing for and enforcing the school attendance of all children residing in the district. The school committee is responsible for ascertaining and recording the names, ages and other pertinent information concerning all children within their district who are between ages five and 16 and all minors over 16 who do not meet the requirements for the completion of sixth grade. Supervisors of attendance, appointed by the school committee, are responsible for maintaining these records and ensuring their

completeness and accuracy. The school committee must file an annual report with the Department of Education which sets forth information concerning the number of children recorded, classified by ages, together with the number attending public or private schools, and the number not attending school, in any given year.

Q: ***Who in a school district is responsible for handling attendance problems?***

A: Every school committee is required to appoint a supervisor of attendance to investigate truancy cases. The supervisor of attendance has the power to apprehend and take to school any child who is truant and is required to investigate all cases where a child in the district fails to attend school.

Q: ***What are parents' responsibilities under the law for ensuring that a child attends school?***

A: Parents or guardians are responsible for ensuring that a child under their control attends school. If a child fails to attend school for seven day sessions or 14 half day sessions within any six month period, the supervisor of attendance may file a complaint in court and the responsible parent(s) may be fined not more than $20.00. In addition, if parents do not assure that their child attends school regularly, a care and protection petition or CHINS petition could be filed in court with respect to that child.

Q: ***What kind of attendance records must be kept by each school?***

A: Each school must keep attendance registers that are available for inspection by the school committee, superintendent, supervisors of attendance, and the Commissioner of the state Department of Education and his agents.

Q: ***What are the potential consequences for schools if they have low attendance rates?***

A. The student attendance rate is one of the indicators of school and school-district underperformance under regulations adopted by the Board of Education. If student attendance rates fall below the standard established by the Board for three reporting years, the school or school district can be designated as "underperforming," resulting in the appointment of an independent fact-finding team and adoption of a remedial plan.

Q: ***What is Learnfare and what are the reporting requirements for schools under this program?***

A: State law establishes specific school attendance requirements for certain school age children under the age of 14 as a condition of their family's eligibility for benefits under Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC). The Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) provides each school with a list of children in the school who are subject to Learnfare. At the end of each calendar

quarter, the school must report to DTA any student on the list who has more than eight unexcused absences. If a student reaches eight unexcused absences, he or she is placed on probation by DTA. DTA then asks the student's school to provide attendance information monthly for as long as he or she is on probation. If the student has more than three unexcused absences in a month while on probation, he or she will be removed from his or her parent's TAFDC grant for that month.

Q: ***What are a school's obligations when a student leaves school permanently?***

A: The law states that before a student, aged 16 or older, shall be considered to have left public school permanently, an administrator of the school must send a notice within 10 days of the student's 15th consecutive absence to the parent or guardian of the student. The notice must be written in both the primary language of the parent or guardian and in English. The notice must state that the student and his parent or guardian have the right to meet with school officials prior to the student permanently leaving school to discuss the reasons for the student permanently leaving the school and alternative educational or other placements.

In addition, the superintendent of each school district is required to report annually to the Department of Education the number of students 16 years of age or older who have permanently left school, the reasons each student has left, and any alternative placement a student has taken.

Appendix C

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND CONTACTS

"Truancy: First Step to a Lifetime of Problems" (NCJ 161958)
Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse
PO Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849
www.ncjrs.org/jjdp.htm
(800) 638-8736

"Manual to Combat Truancy"
US Department of Education
600 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202
www.anstec.com/doed/ordernow.htm
(800) 624-0100

National Dropout Prevention Center
Clemson University
205 Martin Street
Clemson, SC 29634
www.dropoutprevention.org/
(864) 656-2599

National Center for Education Statistics
Office of Education Research and Improvement
US Department of Education
555 New Jersey Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20208-5574
http://nces.ed.gov/
(202) 219-1828

National Association of School Resource Officers
PO Box 40
Boynton Beach, Florida 33425
www.rt66.com/NASRO/
(561) 736-1736

National School Safety Center
4165 Thousand Oaks Blvd, Suite 290
Westlake, CA 91362
www.nssc1.org/
(805) 373-9977

Northeast Regional Educational Laboratory
Brown University
222 Richmond Street, Suite 300
Providence, RI 02903
www.lab.brown.edu
(800) 521-9550